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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Finally, another mid-term election is over but the licking of the wounds incurred by the Democrats. That is, unless you happen to live in Massachusetts. Here, the "Scott Brown Syndrome" didn't seem to take hold two elections in a row! Even the plethora of negative campaigns didn't seem to take its toll like it did everywhere else in the country.

One thing is definitely certain today, and that is the people in this country are fed up with how things are going - and politicians are feeling that wrath. Unless things drastically turn around positively over the next couple of years, you can be sure that we're going to see even more of a political backlash in the next election.

Frankly, I don't see how things are going to improve much over the next couple of years in Washington, especially with the GOP in charge in the House. I think that we're going to see and overwhelming landslide victory for the Republicans in 2012, much like was witnessed in the McGovern debacle a few decades ago. I can almost imagine a similar GOP victory, with me once again being able to join my fellow Commonwealth citizenry chanting "Don't blame me, I'm from Massachusetts!" (the only state that McGovern won in that election!).

Anyway, now that the elections are over, we can focus our attention on the rapidly-approaching Thanksgiving holiday! More than likely, my wife and I will be at home this year, by ourselves, celebrating the feast. I don't have a problem with that, for the most part, and look forward to the preparations and enjoying of the turkey and all of the fixings. Only a couple of weeks away!

Don't forget to turn your clocks back this weekend, and enjoy that extra hour of sleep! The sad part of all this is losing that extra hour of daylight - a sure sigh that winter isn't that far off!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. First off, if you're reading this as A-ONE "hits the streets", and if you're in a locality that observes it, we abandon Daylight Savings Time this weekend and return to Standard Time. This means that you'll have an extra hour to sleep on Sunday morning, but it also means that it'll be getting dark an hour earlier. That is, of course, if you're in the northern hemisphere.

I don't know about you, but the idea of having that extra hour to sleep has never quite counterbalanced the idea of it being dark outside at 5:00pm. But like it or not, that's what we're faced with.

I'll never forget the time a co-worker messed up and turned his clock ahead instead of back and got to work two hours late, unable to understand why he was catching hell. Yeah, he never was the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Another feature of this time of year is, of course (if you're in the United States), the elections. I don't know how you feel about it, but this campaign season seemed a horrible one to me. I can count the number of positive campaign ads I've seen on one hand. As a matter of fact, at two fingered man could do it.

What disappoints me the most is that "my guy", the one I wanted to see as my state's governor, did it too. To be 'fair', his opponent put out more, 'dirtier' negative ads, but that's hardly relevant to me. When I saw the first negative ad from "my guy", I did a little research. What was said in the ad COULD be considered true, but only from a certain, very narrow perspective, and only with massive assumptions, a large dose of misinterpretation and careful selection of language.

I was very disheartened and emailed the campaign to say so. I guess the problem is that once one side puts out a negative ad, the only response that will get the voters' attention is, "Oh yeah? Well he/she <fill in the blank>".

I don't agree with the philosophy, and I don't like the practice from anyone, but the fact remains that negative ads are used for one reason and one reason only: They work.

It seems that when we hear a negative ad, we think "That's terrible! If he/she could do something like THAT..." without stopping to think about whether its even true or not, or where we might go to check it out.

I guess that we never get to that point, and just remember the bad stuff that gets said. The really defeating part of this is that when you have both sides putting out negative ads, people end up picking the one they would have picked anyway. The bottom line? People believe what they want to believe and always find some way to justify it.

I can remember back to the 2000 election. Remember when both sides misrepresented the other not in a bid to make themselves look better but to make the other guy look worse? Well, back then there WERE ads also saying "Yeah but look at the things I HAVE done".

Then came the 2004 election when ALL rules went out the window and candidates (and I'm not talking about just the presidential candidates here) focused on negativity toward their opponents. Again, negative ads won out. So the die was cast and it set the stage for the 2008 election. More of the same, with the addition of "Yes We Can". I had hoped that this

simple rallying cry would help to bring things around again, but then came this campaign season and "Yes We Can" was replaced with either "But You Didn't" or "But The Other Guys Wouldn't Let Us".

While the republicans have "taken over" the House of Representatives" and should be happy about having some power to compensate their obvious feelings of inadequacy in other areas, they're already showing that they intend to stick to their obstructionism, switching only from "but you're not paying attention to us" to "we don't have to pay attention to you".

I try, most of the time, to avoid interjecting my personal feelings into discussions like this... once in a while I even succeed... but I've got to make one statement here. I think it was a mistake for the President to "waste" the time he did on trying to create a bipartisan atmosphere for as long as he did. I'm not saying he should have been obstructionist, but it probably would have been more effective in the short term and made no difference in the long term if he'd given it a try, said "okay, you've had your chance to join in" and then pushed through the things he had to. And yes, I'm talking about "Obamacare" and the stimulus package.

Good, bad or indifferent, the stimulus program did make some progress. If it's guilty of anything, it's of not having done enough. I'll go back almost 70 years here... When FDR instituted massive work programs. They were, for the time, unbelievably expensive. And every time Congress complained and cut things back, the economy faltered and sagged again. It wasn't until he "kept the money flowing" that we saw recovery. And even then, it unfortunately took World War II to push us out of the hole once and for all.

NOW, we find ourselves IN two wars. Iraq and Afghanistan. We are not rushing to build battleships like we did back then, and the money spent on the things we DO build seems to benefit few other than the management of a handful of companies and their stock holders. Do we see huge fits of hiring, putting people to work? Defense plants? No.

The best thing we could do right now is to finish our mission in that part of the world, and then use some of the money we've been spending on those wars on infrastructure. The thing about "infrastructure" is that we need it. We're going to need it anyway. And the longer we wait, the more expensive it's going to get.

Think about a country without the interstate highway system. But that's only the start. We HAVE an interstate highway system. But it needs maintenance and repair. Yes, it's money spent by the government, and its our money, but the highway system benefits us all.

The same is true of the "digital" infrastructure. I'm not saying that the government should take over the internet, but funding projects is one way to assure us of a solid, secure digital data network, whether that may be for cell phones or for internet access, we need to repair and maintain this as well.

And then, probably most importantly, there is another "infrastructure" we should do some work on, and quickly... the electrical infrastructure. Our "grid" has been do for massive work for decades. The issues with it are difficult ones to deal with, but they are important, verging on critical. "The grid" is, in many areas, at the limit of what it can do, which means that it needs to be upgraded or modified or expanded, and in some areas its in need of repair and maintenance.

Yes, it’s a big job. Yes, it probably will take years and will range from one side of the country to the other. But it needs to be done. And it’s better done now than later, and NOW is when people need work. Heck, unemployment is still too darned close to ten percent. Put people to work for these things, and the economy will start moving again. To quote Oscar Goldman, better, faster, stronger.

Well on that note, I’m going to leave you ’till next week. Be sure to tune in next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Kinect Motion-Sensing System!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Supreme Court Hears Violence!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Kinect Motion-Sensing System Impresses

There are a lot of futuristic things we’re still waiting on: jet packs for the entire family, self-driving cars and time-travel, to name a few. But one new, pretty darn amazing bit of technology has finally come to fruition, thanks to the folks at Microsoft.

The Kinect system, on sale beginning Thursday for the Xbox 360 game console, offers controller-free control of living room entertainment and aptly delivers a groundbreaking piece of technology.

It’s part game controller, part fitness guru and part "Minority Report," the movie where Tom Cruise famously interacts with a multi-touch interface by making rapid motions with his hands. Instead of gripping a physical controller to play games and movies on your Xbox 360, Kinect allows you to simply move your body - hands, feet, hips - to do everything.

Kinect is a hybrid video camera and motion sensor that sits just above or below your television display. It looks like an extra wide webcam and connects to the Xbox 360 - even older models - through the USB port. Kinect sells for $150 and comes with one game; you can buy it bundled with a low-end Xbox 360 for $300, saving $50 on the package.

Activating and configuring Kinect was easy enough, though it does

require a system update.

Kinect calibrated itself by testing the ambient light in my room, the background noise and my own voice. Kinect then asked me to get used to performing my moves in a fairly large rectangular space about 8 feet in front of the television.

The 46-inch LCD display from Sceptre I used for my tests delivered the Kinect experience in tack-sharp high-definition. A larger-than-average display is ideal because it’ll help you see the various digital versions of yourself more clearly, as captured by Kinect’s camera and motion-sensing voodoo.

At the Xbox 360 main menu screen, a small dark box appeared at the lower right corner. Inside was a live view of my body, with my hands glowing at my sides. A quick wave of my right hand told Kinect I was ready to interact.

To select items on most menu screens, I simply held up my right hand at about shoulder height and guided an on-screen hand to an icon or word. In games, similar control takes place to select people and objects. Simply hover and grab.

Kinect also brings voice control to the Xbox 360, and you can launch movies and social media apps by saying something like "Xbox. Play." I had spotty success with that and found the hand guide technique more dependable.

The game that comes with Kinect is "Kinect Adventures," an outdoorsy jaunt into the world of whitewater rapids and antigravity. As I stood in front of my TV, I looked at my avatar’s back, careening down a rushing river in an inflatable raft. As I instinctively stepped and leaned to the left, my character on-screen did so as well, steering the raft around rocks and obstacles.

In "Space Pop," I floated in a low-gravity room and waved my arms and legs to pop bubbles for points. These games were fine for a warm-up, but I was quickly ready for a more stern test.

The Kinect games now available all require the system to play them. Your physical Xbox 360 controller won’t suffice. There will be Kinect-enhanced games available later that can be played both ways, but Microsoft Corp. says Kinect will give you a better experience.

I met my match with "Dance Central" ($50, MTV Games, rated "T"). This top-shelf title is essential for Kinect users. I mimicked the on-screen character’s dance moves for high scores. I jumped and gyrated to songs from top artists such as Lady Gaga and Audio Push. I learned the moves individually, with a few restarts, then launched into a dance battle to string them together to the music.

A circle beneath my on-screen feet glowed green when I hit the moves correctly. It glowed red when I muffed the moves, indicating I had suddenly sprouted at least two left feet, if not more. The music on this title is fresh, and additional tracks can be purchased through the Xbox Live Marketplace.

One title that was a dud for me was "Kinect Joy Ride," a cartoonish driving game. Driving is one of those game genres that begs for a physical controller. I had trouble keeping my hands in an imaginary grip

on an imaginary steering wheel to control my imaginary car. I crashed because I overcorrected my steering. My hands moved too freely because they weren’t really holding on to anything.

My wife had better luck when I raced against her. She even found time to lean over and answer a real-world cell phone call while "driving," gently cradling the phone on her shoulder while gripping her nonexistent steering wheel.

There is one title that literally left me breathless, but for all the right reasons. "Your Shape: Fitness Evolved" is a masterpiece. The exercise game talks and walks you through precise movements to improve your cardio and work out your muscles.

I began by standing in front of my TV and letting Kinect measure my body size and structure. I then used a hand-motion menu to enter my age, weight and exercise habits so the game would learn not to overexert me too soon.

Within minutes I was following along with the Tai chi and yoga moves of an on-screen instructor, with my on-screen mat placed just behind and to the right of her. She led me through the movements, and at the end of each routine I was given a score for my performance, based on how well I stayed in rhythm and mimicked her deep knee bends.

I would have never thought that the most impressive game title for Microsoft’s foray into motion-sensor gaming would involve me invoking the phrase "Namaste" instead of "activate plasma rifle."

Motion-sensor gaming has now hit all three major gaming platforms. Nintendo Co.’s Wii arrived first. Sony Corp.’s Move for PlayStation 3 added more realistic games, graphics and highly acute player control.

Microsoft Kinect may lack the fine character control of the Move, but it adds the promise of an expanded breadth of activities in front of the gaming console. The possibilities for Kinect are rich, and I will forever more feel a touch guilty while sitting in that well-worn corner of my couch to play a video game.

Four stars out of four.

Court Hears Arguments on Violent Video Games

The Supreme Court on Tuesday expressed sympathy for a California law that aims to keep children from buying ultra-violent video games in which players maim, kill or sexually assault images of people.

But justices seemed closely split on whether the restrictions are constitutional.

The high court has been reluctant to carve out exceptions to the First Amendment, striking down a ban on videos showing graphic violence to animals earlier this year.

California officials argue that they should be allowed to limit minors’ ability to pick up violent video games on their own at retailers because of the purported damage they cause to the mental development of

children. Some justices appeared to agree.

"We do not have a tradition in this country of telling children they should watch people actively hitting schoolgirls over the head with a shovel so they'll beg with mercy, being merciless and decapitating them, shooting people in the leg so they fall down," Chief Justice John Roberts said.

Roberts decried that one game lets a player "pour gasoline over them, set them on fire and urinate on them." "We protect children from that," he said. "We don't actively expose them to that."

California's 2005 law would prohibit anyone under 18 from buying or renting games that give players the option of "killing, maiming, dismembering, or sexually assaulting an image of a human being." Parents would be able to buy the games for their children, but retailers who sell directly to minors would face fines of up to $1,000 for each game sold.

That means that children would need an adult to get games like "Postal 2," the first-person shooter by developer Running With Scissors that features the ability to light unarmed bystanders on fire. It would also apply to the popular "Grand Theft Auto IV," a third-person shoot-'em-up from Rockstar Games that allows gamers to portray carjacking, gun-toting gangsters.

Some Supreme Court justices wondered where the regulation would stop if they allowed California's law to go forward.

"What about films?" asked Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. "What about comic books?"

Justice Antonin Scalia wondered if movies showing drinking and smoking might be next.

"I am concerned with the First Amendment, which says Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech," he said. "It has never been understood that the freedom of speech did not include portrayals of violence. You are asking us to create a whole new prohibition which the American people never ratified when they ratified the First Amendment."

The California law never took effect. Lower courts have said the law violates minors' constitutional rights under the First and Fourteenth amendments, and that the state lacked enough evidence to prove that violent games cause physical and psychological harm to minors. Courts in six other states, including Michigan and Illinois, reached similar conclusions, striking down similar bans.

The Supreme Court will make a decision sometime next year.

California lawmakers were trying to help parents control what type of video games their children had access to, said Zackery P. Morazzini, a California supervisory deputy attorney general who argued the case for the state.

But a lawyer for the Entertainment Merchants Association said that there was no proof that violent video games were any more harmful than television, books or movies. "We have a history in this country of new mediums coming along and people vastly overreacting to them, thinking the sky is falling, our children are all going to be turned into

criminals," Paul M. Smith said.

Roberts appeared to disagree.

"In these video games the child is not sitting there passively watching something. The child is doing the killing. The child is doing the maiming. And I suppose that might be understood to have a different impact on the child's moral development," Roberts said.

The case appeared to divide the court's conservative members, with Justices Scalia and Samuel Alito engaging in a spirited discussion about the original meaning of the Constitution.

"I think what Justice Scalia wants to know is what James Madison thought about video games," Alito said to laughter in the courtroom.

"No, I want to know what James Madison thought about violence," Scalia retorted.

Showing stronger support for the law, Justice Stephen Breyer said it doesn't make sense to allow bans on minors accessing pornography and not be able to block them from graphically violent video games.

What if a video game showed "gratuitous torture of children?" Breyer asked. "'Now you can't buy a naked woman, but you can go and buy that,' you say to the 13-year-old. Now what sense is there to that?"

"Why isn't it common sense to say a state has the right to say, 'Parent, you want this for your child? You go buy it yourself,'" Breyer added.

The case also provoked debate among the court's more liberal members.

Justice Elena Kagan pointed out that many of the younger staff at the Supreme Court probably grew up playing versions of the video game "Mortal Kombat," a martial arts fighting game that allows victorious players to finish their opponents with graphically violent moves called "fatalities."

And nearing the end of arguments, Justice Sonia Sotomayor pointed out the difficulties with enforcement.

She noted that the law bans minors buying video games that show violence to people. But what if game designers make a couple of anatomical changes to the depiction of human beings, like elongating the ears?

"Would a video game that portrayed a Vulcan as opposed to a human being, being maimed and tortured, would that be covered by the act?" Sotomayor asked.

Morazzini said those games would then be legal to sell to children.

Roberts suggested that the court might find a compromise like it did with "crush videos" showing animal deaths. He said the court struck down that ban in a way so that a new, narrower law might be legal.

"Why isn't that a good approach here?" Roberts asked.

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The case is Schwarzenegger v. Entertainment Merchants Association, 08-1448.

Violent Video Game Ban Could Set Dangerous Precedent

Thank God Steve Jobs isn’t on the Supreme Court.

Our nation’s highest justices, you see, are in the midst of debating a case about violent video games. They’re trying to determine whether the government has the right to decide which video games minors should and shouldn’t be allowed to buy. In other words, they’re trying to determine whether centuries-old guidelines about free speech still apply to modern forms of media like Playstations and Xboxes.

Their decision, needless to say, could have serious implications on the future of First Amendment rights. And I think we can all imagine how Steve Jobs would vote.

The Supreme Court case revolves around a California law passed in 2005. The law makes it illegal for anyone to sell a video game deemed as "violent" to a minor. Breaking it would result in a fine of a thousand dollars per violation.

Thanks to legal challenges, the law has never actually gone into effect. And now, its fate rests in the hands of the high court justices.

We can only hope that the U.S. Supreme Court agrees with the federal courts that have struck down this law in the past. It isn’t even limited to California; similar laws have been enacted in eight states overall, according to NPR, and have been deemed unconstitutional by federal judges in each instance. It’s no small coincidence.

Let me be clear about one thing: I rarely play video games - and I’m certainly not a minor - but I have every reason to be concerned about this decision. And so do you.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court case comes down to the divisive question of how much the government should "protect" us from "offensive" materials.

Consider this: The video game industry has already established a ratings system similar to what we see with movies. If anything, it may be even more effective than its film-based cousin: A 2009 Federal Trade Commission report found only 20 percent of minors were able to purchase "mature"-rated video games, compared to 28 percent that were able to buy tickets to R-rated movies. Does the government really need to intervene and get involved? Isn’t this system - not to mention that silly ol’ thing called parental supervision - sufficient enough?

Principles aside, the violent video game law poses plenty of practical challenges. According to the law’s wording, a violent video game would be defined as one "in which the range of options available to a player includes killing, maiming, dismembering, or sexually assaulting an image of a human being" in a manner that’s "patently offensive," appeals to a person’s "deviant or morbid interests," and lacks "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

So who’s going to make the call as to which video games are "patently offensive" and which aren’t? Or, as Justice Antonin Scalia asked during the arguments, "What’s a ’deviant’ violent video game? As opposed to what - a

’normal’ violent video game?"

Like with Apple’s arbitrary App Store approval system, we’re looking at a purely subjective judgment. Unlike Apple’s little world, however, this is the real government we’re dealing with here - and granting this type of power is a dangerous precedent to set.

"If you are supposing a category of violent materials dangerous to children, then how do you cut it off at video games? What about films? What about comic books?" asked U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Supporters of the California video game law counter that argument with the notion that this scenario is different; because players are actively involved, they say, the violent acts are more damaging to their minds than the graphic violence in movies and on TV. They’ve even dug up some studies that suggest playing violent video games "increases aggressive thought and behavior" and "engenders poor school performance" in minors. Those studies, of course, conveniently make the mistake of assuming causation from correlation - just because some kids who play video games also have behavioral problems doesn’t mean that the video games caused those problems - but hey, it’s far easier to jump to that conclusion than to search for a real explanation.

Here’s the kicker: Even if you accept the "video games are different" argument, opening the door to government-controlled content regulation is asking for trouble. Do we want to make the First Amendment a medium-specific form of protection? If evil, mind-warping video games warrant special consideration, what other modern media will need supervision next? Surely our smartphone app markets should be regulated too, right? There’s an awful lot of interactive material there that we need to be protected from - just ask you-know-who. If this law is green-lighted, we’d better brace ourselves for an awful lot of asterisks under America’s "free speech" header.

Finally, with government-enforced fines on selling violent video games, how long will it be until the gaming industry itself starts to change? Forbes.com blogger Paul Tassi raises an interesting point:

"If video games are equated with pornography and it becomes a crime to sell them to minors, ’family-friendly’ retailers might change their store policies and someone like Wal-Mart might ban all these games from their shelves entirely. This would in turn cause developers to tone down the violence in their titles to make sure that every outlet will sell them."

All factors considered, the outcome of this case is extremely consequential. When real world policies start to resemble those of Steve Jobs’ world, there is definite cause for concern.

ESA: California Failed to Prove Argument in ’Violent Video Games’ Case

I’m just off a conference call with Entertainment Software Association CEO Michael Gallagher in which he and others discussed how things went during today’s arguments before the Supreme Court. The case, as you’ve probably heard, involves a California law passed in 2005 - twice ruled unconstitutional by lower courts - that bans the sale of what it describes

as "violent video games" to minors, and fines stores that do so anyway $1,000 per incident.

Gallagher was upbeat about the court's reaction to the ESA's position and read it as combative toward the law's proponents due to vague definitions and suspect research claims that violent video games cause deviant behavior in minors.

"Today was a historic day, not only for the computer and video game industry, but for the First Amendment," said Gallagher. "12 times in eight years we've had this issue raised about whether video games are speech, and if so, to what degree of protection are they entitled to, and I think that the court today, you heard every single argument that the industry has made articulated not just by Paul [Smith of Jenner Block, the ESA's advocate before the court]...but by the justices themselves."

Gallagher then outlined what the ESA views as the legal tests both the law and California's counsel before the court failed to pass.

"The state law, such as what California passed to restrict speech, in this case for video games, are subject to strict scrutiny," said Gallagher. "That requires that they demonstrate a compelling public interest that's served by proposed law, and that the proposed law is the least restrictive means of achieving the intended goal."

"In our view, the argument this morning doesn't change our conclusion that the state of California has not proven either a compelling government interest, or that they've established that the means they're proposing are the least restrictive."

Turning to the question of research cited by the California law that argues "violent video games" cause deviant behavior in minors, Gallagher thinks the justices weren't buying it.

"In particular, we're very...we thought it was very clear to a number of the justices that 82 social scientists have filed a legal brief with the court urging it to reject California's law because it's...as they quote, it has not produced substantial evidence that violent games cause psychological or neurological harm to children."

Besides, said Gallagher, "when you look at the least restrictive means component, the Entertainment Software Rating Board is a proven system that parents rely upon."

Gallagher's certainly not wrong about that. According to a 2009 Peter D. Hart Research Associates study, nearly 90% of American parents with children who play games are aware of the ESRB's ratings and use them.

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Military Ready for War in Cyberspace

The military’s new Cyber Command, responsible for shielding 15,000 military computer networks from intruders, has become fully operational, the Defense Department said on Wednesday.

More than 100 foreign intelligence organizations are trying to break into U.S. networks, Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn wrote in the September/October issue of the journal Foreign Affairs. Some already have the capacity to disrupt U.S. information infrastructure, he said.

Gates ordered the new unit’s creation in June 2009 to address the growing threat of cyber-attack.

It consolidates offensive and defensive operations under Army General Keith Alexander, who also heads the National Security Agency, the Defense Department’s intelligence arm that protects national security information and intercepts foreign communications.

"Cyberspace is essential to our way of life and U.S. Cyber Command synchronizes our efforts in the defense of (Defense Department) networks," Alexander said in the Pentagon announcement.

Lynn declared the unit, based at Fort Meade, Maryland, fully up and running in a memorandum dated October 31, said Colonel Rivers Johnson, a Cyber Command spokesman.

The new unit began work in May, establishing a joint operations center and transitioning personnel and functions from the old structures.

It is part of the Offutt Air Force, Nebraska-based Strategic Command, the organization responsible for U.S. nuclear and space operations as well as information warfare and global military intelligence.

Europe Tests Cyber Defences Against Hackers

European computer guards battled Thursday against a simulated attempt by hackers to bring down critical Internet services in the first pan-continental test of cyber defences.

All 27 of the European Union’s member nations as well as Iceland, Norway and Switzerland took part in the simulation as participants or observers, working together against the fictitious online assault, the European Commission said.

The exercise was based on a scenario in which one country after the other increasingly suffered problems accessing the Internet, making it difficult for citizens, businesses and public institutions to access essential services.

Security experts had to work together to prevent a simulated "total network crash," said Jonathan Todd, a commission spokesman for digital affairs.

"I would like to emphasise, so as to avoid any ’War of the Worlds’

scenario here, this is purely an exercise and practice," Todd told a news briefing.

"There will be absolutely no effect on Internet connectivity in Europe."

The threat of assaults on computer systems has been identified as a key challenge in Europe, the United States, and NATO.

The threat came to life in a costly cyber strike against Estonia in 2007 and the Stuxnet computer worm attack in Iran this year.

The United States held its own major exercise against a large-scale cyber attack on critical infrastructure in late September with 12 international partners and 60 private companies.

The European exercise will be followed by more tests with more complex scenarios on the global level, the EU’s executive arm said.

The EU hopes the exercise will help the bloc understand how such an incident can take place and ensure that authorities know who to contact in other members states in any cyber strikes, the commission said.

"This exercise to test Europe’s preparedness against cyber threats is an important first step towards working together to combat potential online threats to essential infrastructure and ensuring citizens and businesses feel safe and secure online," said European technology commissioner Neelie Kroes.

The European Commission proposed on September 30 a new regulation that would impose heavier criminal sanctions against hackers and producers of malicious software.

Cyber security will be one of the top issues that NATO leaders will tackle at a summit of the 28-nation military alliance in Lisbon on November 20-29.

During a visit to Brussels in mid-September, US Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn urged NATO allies to build a "cyber shield" against the treat of computer attacks.

Warning that military assets were not the only targets of cyber strikes, he underscored the need to protect the computer systems of vital economic infrastructure such as power grids and financial markets.

EU Wants To Give People Power To Vanish from Internet

Europe’s justice chief Viviane Reding called Thursday for new rules to give citizens more control of their online personal data, with the "right to be forgotten" from Facebook or Google.

Reding unveiled proposals to update a European Union rule on data protection that dates back to 1995, years before the proliferation of social networking websites and web search engines.

"The protection of personal data is a fundamental right," the European justice commissioner said.

"To guarantee this right, we need clear and consistent data protection rules. We also need to bring our laws up to date with the challenges raised by new technologies and globalisation," she said.

Her services want people to reclaim ownership of their digital imprint, including photographs, in an age when many users complain it is virtually impossible to avoid a permanent trace being left on mainframe computer servers the world over.

"People should be able to give their informed consent to the processing of their personal data, for example when surfing online, and should have the 'right to be forgotten' when their data is no longer needed or they want their data to be deleted," the European Commission said.

There are growing fears about Facebook's influence on people's careers and social and private lives, including failed job interviews and divorces, with cases of "Facebook suicide" increasing.

The commission launched a two-month public consultation on its proposals with the aim of drafting legislation in 2011.

The EU executive wants to limit the collection and use of personal data to the strict minimum necessary.

"Individuals should also be clearly informed in a transparent way on how, why, by whom, and for how long their data is collected and used," the commission said.

The commission also wants to revise rules on protecting data in the police and criminal justice sphere and ensure a high level of protection for information shared beyond EU borders.

The European consumer rights group BEUC welcomed the proposals, saying: "Online business practices do not always respect the current data protection directive requirements and such breaches fuel a lack of consumer confidence."

"The commission has planted the flag showing that the consumer's right to privacy should not be undermined merely because it has become easier and more profitable to break it in the virtual world," said BEUC director general Monique Goyens.

The Association for Competitive Technology, an industry group representing nearly 3,000 computer firms, said the proposals were a chance to fix a "patchwork of laws" that "hinders our potential to develop services for the entire European Union."

"The lack of harmonisation of data protection rules creates enormous challenges for entrepreneurs who are trying to use emerging technologies to expand into new markets," said ACT president Jonathan Zuck.

New Internet Search Engine Launches: Blekko

Challengers to Google have come and gone but another startup is stepping up to try to make its mark in Internet search.

The latest Web search engine is Blekko.com, which launched a beta, or test,

product on Monday backed by millions in venture capital.

"When we started this company our goal was to build a search engine that not only let you do your usual searches but also lets you do searches that you just can’t do anywhere else," Blekko chief executive Rich Skrenta said.

Blekko employs a feature it calls "slashtags" to allow users to narrow down their searches to only the most trusted and most relevant sites, cutting out spam sites and sites of poor quality.

"A slashtag is a tool to filter search results," Blekko said. "Rather than searching the entire Web, a slashtag allows you to search just the sites you want searched."

Skrenta said Blekko produces the most relevant results by allowing users to create slashtags that create lists of recommended sites.

"Not everyone has to participate for the model to work - most people don’t edit Wikipedia, yet we have a vast encyclopedia which long ago dwarfed the closed Britannica," he said.

"But a small fraction of the Web audience that does get involved can help make the search experience better for everyone else," he said.

Blekko also pledged full transparency with its search ranking data, showing how it ranks sites for any particular query.

Danny Sullivan, editor-in-chief of technology blog SearchEngineLand.com, noted that a number of search companies have failed in the past to break through in a market dominated by Google.

"By no means do I expect Blekko to become a Google killer," Sullivan said in a blog post. "Despite Google’s flaws, it works extremely well for millions of people each day."

But Sullivan said Blekko might find an audience among Web users "who seek an alternative for when Google or (Microsoft’s) Bing don’t come through.

"Special interest groups might also be attracted to the ability to create their own custom search engines," he said. "If anything, I think that’s Blekko’s ultimate strength."

Creative Announces Tablets Starting at $249

Creative Labs on Tuesday announced entry-level media tablets with 7-inch and 10-inch touchscreens, with prices ranging from US$249 to $319.

The Ziio Pure Wireless Entertainment tablets come with Google’s Android 2.1 OS and storage ranging from 8GB to 16GB. Some models are priced lower than Archos’ 101 Internet Tablet and Velocity Micro’s Cruz tablet, which are priced at $299.

The tablets will start shipping in early December, Creative said.

The Ziio tablet will join a highly competitive market led by Apple’s

iPad, which shipped in April. Samsung has already started selling its Galaxy Tab in some countries, and Research In Motion, Hewlett-Packard and Dell have announced plans to launch tablets. Research firm Gartner is pegging tablet shipments to reach 54.8 million units next year.

Creative is primarily known for its portable media players, speakers and headsets, and has built the tablet to its strengths. The company says the tablet is able to sync with its audio products via Bluetooth to play music. The device includes an audio application and an Apt-X codec to achieve quality audio streaming and playback.

Beyond music, users will be able to check e-mail, surf the Web or play casual games, Creative said. Applications are offered through the company's ZiiStore.

The tablet is powered by the homegrown ZMS-08 processor, which is based on a 1GHz Arm processor and can play 1080p video. The device comes with an HDMI (high-definition multimedia interface) port to play video from the tablet on high-definition TVs. It also comes with a MicroSD card slot for additional storage.

The device comes with a front-facing camera and has Wi-Fi capabilities. The company says the device can play back up to five hours of video on a single battery charge.

The 7-inch tablet weighs 400 grams (0.88 pounds), while the 10-inch tablet weighs 650 grams.

OLPC XO-3 Tablet Delayed

Nicholas Negroponte, chairman of One Laptop Per Child said that the XO-3 tablet computer will debut sometime in February 2011, about 45 days later than originally planned.

Negroponte said that he wants the screen to be flexible so that it is more resistant to breaking, but that it doesn't need to roll up.

"The issue has been really finding an unbreakable material, which may not be plastic, it may be glass or some flavor of glass," he said during a video interview at MIT.

At first the XO-3 won't be branded OLPC, rather made by Marvell, with the actual XO-3 to follow.

The tablet will eventually cost US$75 and during a May 2010 interview, Negroponte said hitting that mark wouldn't be a problem.

Sitting in his sparse office in the MIT Media Lab, which he founded 25 years ago, Negroponte said that the job of the XO-3 is "pushing where normal market forces wouldn't otherwise."

"We're going to push down on price, we're going to push on non-breakable, we're going to push particularly on power because we want to hand crank these things," he said. "Our characteristics are ones that the market wouldn't do normally, but that we will bring sooner or prove that can be done."

Once the XO-3 tablet does debut, it will co-exist "for some time" along with the original laptop.

"It is unclear to us now both in the labs and imagining the future if the haptic version of the tablet keyboard is going to be sufficient to allow you to use it as a general purpose computer," Negroponte said.

MacBook Air Problem Reportedly Confirmed by Memo

An Air leak is causing problems for Apple. A memo circulating on tech web sites, purporting to be a leaked internal document from the Cupertino, Calif.-based company, confirms reports of display problems for the new MacBook Air.

There have been complaints on tech sites and in several Apple-focused forums about flickering horizontal lines in the new product. Apple hasn't publicly indicated it's aware of a problem, but the memo, first published Thursday on Boy Genius Report and dated Oct. 27, said the "internal display fades dark to light colors after waking from sleep."

The memo, which is marked "Apple Internal Use Only" and "Issue/Investigation in Progress," said the problem affects both the 13-inch and the 11-inch models. The newest MacBook Air was unveiled about two weeks ago, and is the thinnest computer yet from Apple.

The resolution to the problem, according to the memo, is to "have the customer put the computer to sleep by closing the lid, wait 10 seconds, then open the lid to wake the computer." It added that this action "should force a display power cycle, and the display should return to normal."

The memo also said the "issue has been isolated and will be fixed in an upcoming software update." It recommends that Apple take the position that "it is aware of the issue and is working on a solution."

In addition to the flickering horizontal lines after waking from sleep, there are reports of a similar issue if an external display is plugged in. Additionally, some users are finding a bug that causes the screen to fade to dark from light repeatedly, also after waking, and there are postings on forums about screen freezes and a distortion that looks like water ripples vibrating.

There are also reports that battery life is reduced by as much as third by installing Adobe Flash on the Safari browser. Apple has had a running battle with Adobe over the use of Flash on its devices, contending that HTML5 and other open-source technologies are better for users in the long run.

In addition to normal customer relations, Apple is being watched carefully as to its response on this apparent product defect.

During the summer, it continually denied and downplayed antenna-reception problems that were being repeatedly reported for the iPhone 4. Users were saying that, if they placed their hand or finger on the corner where the antenna was, the device suffered a signal loss.

In addition to not acknowledging the problem, Apple at one point issued

a software update to the signal meter, suggesting that the signal-loss issue was really a problem of how the signal strength was being perceived by the user.

The matter was even dubbed Antennagate by some in the press. Finally, Consumer Reports issued several negative reviews in which the nonprofit organization said it "can't recommend the iPhone 4" because its tests showed an antenna problem that could be fixed by a "bumper" case.

Apple held a hastily arranged press conference. At the event, Apple acknowledged the problem, offered a free bumper case for every iPhone 4 customer, a refund for any case already purchased, or a full refund for an undamaged iPhone 4.

What You Need to Know About New IE Zero-Day

Internet Explorer is under attack again. Microsoft has issued a security advisory explaining a newly-discovered exploit impacting most versions of the Internet Explorer Web browser. The security advisory contains details about the threat, as well as some guidance to protect vulnerable browsers pending a patch from Microsoft to fix the hole.

Andrew Storms, Director of Security Operations for nCircle, commented on the new threat, "It's always a serious concern when an IE zero-day surfaces, especially when it affects all versions of the browser. It's a little late for Halloween, but two zero days in one week is almost enough to make IT security teams run away screaming."

Storms added, "There is some good news however; Microsoft says the attacks are limited at the moment and data execution prevention (DEP), a security safeguard in newer versions of Windows, may be able to prevent attack execution."

A spokesperson from Symantec e-mailed me with these details. "A new zero-day vulnerability affecting Internet Explorer 6 and 7 is being used in targeted attacks. In these attacks people receive emails with a link pointing to a page which determines if a visitor is using Internet Explorer 6 and 7. If so, the script transfers the visitor unknowingly to the page hosting the exploit where malware is downloaded and runs on their computer without any user interaction. The vulnerability allows for any remote program to be executed without the end user's notice."

According to a post on the Microsoft Security Response Center blog, the issue also affects Internet Explorer 8, but not the beta of Internet Explorer 9. Microsoft also stresses, though, that while IE8 might be technically vulnerable, its superior security controls make it unlikely that it could be exploited. "Impacted versions include Internet Explorer 6, 7 and 8, although our ongoing investigation confirms that default installations of Internet Explorer 8 are unlikely to be exploited by this issue. This is due to the defense in depth protections offered from Data Execution Prevention (DEP), which is enabled by default in Internet Explorer 8 on all supported Windows platforms."

A Symantec blog post describes the threat, and the e-mails used to initiate the exploit. The discovery of this attack was related to targeted e-mails sent to a limited number of potential victims--indicating that perhaps the attackers were seeking to compromise specific targets rather than any random

vulnerable system connected to the Internet.

The Symantec post explains, "Visitors who were served the exploit page didn’t realize it, but went on to download and run a piece of malware on their computer without any interaction at all. The vulnerability allowed for any remote program to be executed without the end user’s notice. Once infected, the malware set itself to start up with the computer, along with a service named ’NetWare Workstation’. The piece of malware opens a backdoor on the computer and then contacts remote servers. It tries to contact a specific server hosted in Poland for small files named with a .gif extension. These small files are actually encrypted files with commands telling the Trojan what to do next."

The Microsoft security advisory lists mitigating factors and workarounds to help users and IT admins guard against this threat. Microsoft recommends that users read e-mail messages in plain text, rather than HTML. Users of Internet Explorer 7 can turn on DEP--which is present, but not enabled by default - to offer additional protection.

Those unfortunate souls that still rely on Internet Explorer 6 are directed to set the Internet and Local Intranet security zones in the browser to High in order to block execution of Active X controls and scripts. In addition, a custom CSS style can be forced to override the Web CSS style sheets to prevent exploit, and organizations can also use the Enhanced Mitigation Experience Toolkit to take advantage of newer security controls on older, less secure software.

Arguably, the simplest solution, though, is to simply install the beta version of Internet Explorer 9. Then you can protect your PCagainst this attack, and experience the new features and benefits of IE9 at the same time.

Candidates with More Facebook Fans Won 70 Percent of Races

Candidates with a greater number of Facebook fans than their opponents won more than 70 percent of races for the US Congress, according to figures released on Wednesday.

Facebook said that in 98 of Tuesday’s most hotly contested House races, 74 percent of the candidates with the most Facebook fans won.

Sixty-nine candidates for the House with the most Facebook fans won while 24 candidates with the most Facebook fans lost, the Palo Alto, California-based social network said in a statement.

Five House races are still too close to call.

In the Senate, 82 percent of the 34 Senate races that have been decided were won by the candidate with more Facebook fans.

Twenty-eight Senate candidates with the most Facebook fans won while six candidates with the most Facebook fans lost. Three races are undecided.

According to the blog AllFacebook.com, which has compiled figures from across the country, Republican candidates outpolled Democrats on Facebook in the races for the Senate, House of Representatives and state governor.

Overall, the Facebook pages of Republican candidates attracted 3.48 million fans while Democratic candidates drew 1.45 million, according to AllFacebook.com, which is independent of the social network.

Republican candidates for the Senate, House or governor occupied eight of the top 10 slots when it comes to Facebook fans.

Bill White, a Democrat running for governor of Texas, had the most fans of any Democrat - 153,391 - but lost his race.

The only other Democrat to crack the top 10 - California gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown with 98,573 - won his race, beating former eBay chief executive Meg Whitman and her 207,818 Facebook fans.

Republicans, led by the ultra-conservative Tea Party movement, picked up at least 60 seats in the House in Tuesday's election in the one of the chamber's largest political swings of the past century. Republicans also snatched six seats in the Senate.

Google Agrees To Settle Buzz Class Action for $8 Million

Google Inc., the top Web search provider, will allocate about $8.5 million to Internet privacy and policy organizations as part of a class action settlement involving its Buzz social hub.

The lawsuit had been filed by users of Google's free e-mail service, Gmail. In February, Google added a new social hub called Buzz, which let Gmail users track their frequently e-mailed contacts' status updates and other information shared online. But frequent e-mails don't necessarily mean people are actually "friends." The class action suit said Google violated privacy rights by automatically adding Buzz to Gmail without making it clear what information would be shared and with whom.

The settlement announced Tuesday acknowledges that Google has made many changes to Buzz to ease privacy concerns. Google is creating an $8.5 million fund, mainly to go to Internet privacy and policy organizations. The company said it will also make additional efforts to teach users about privacy on Buzz.

A federal judge has given the settlement preliminary approval. The U.S. District Court in San Jose, Calif., will consider final approval of the proposed settlement on Jan. 31, 2011.

And So The Exodus Begins - 33 Developers Leave OpenOffice.org

We all knew that it would come to this and it has finally happened - 33 developers have left OpenOffice.org to join The Document Foundation, with more expected to leave in the next few days.

Here is a brief history of what happened for those of you who do not know.

After Oracle acquired Sun Microsystems, OpenOffice.org fell into the hands of Oracle, as did a lot of other products. So, last month a few very

prominent members of the OpenOffice.org community decided to form The Document Foundation and fork OpenOffice.org as LibreOffice, possibly fearing that it could go the OpenSolaris way.

They invited Oracle to join The Document Foundation and to donate the brand "OpenOffice.org". LibreOffice was chosen as a temporary name until Oracle agrees to donate the brand.

Oracle was not pleased and asks those who founded The Document Foundation to leave OpenOffice.org citing "conflict of interest".

As Oracle has given them no choice, they left OpenOffice.org along with 33 other developers.

This is what Jacqueline Rahemipour, Co-Lead, OpenOffice.org Board, wrote:

> Although it has been stressed several times that there will be collaboration on a technical level, and changes are possible - there is no indication from Oracle to change it s mind on the question of the project organization and management. For those who want to achieve such a change, but see no realistic opportunity within the current project and are therefore involved in the TDF, unfortunately this results in an "either / or" question.
>
> The answer for us who sign this letter is clear: We want a change to give the community as well as the software it develops the opportunity to evolve. For this reason, from now on we will support The Document Foundation and will - as a team - develop and promote LibreOffice.

LibreOffice has already got backing from Google, Novell, Red Hat, Canonical etc. Mark Shuttleworth had even said that it may replace OpenOffice.org in future Ubuntu releases. So, the future looks bright for LibreOffice and The Document Foundation and it looks gloomy for OpenOffice.org.

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